

# NEWS

## USDA Commodities Hit the Alaska Highway

by Alex King, Acting Deputy Administrator for Commodity Operations

**E**ver wonder how USDA commodities get from the lower 48 states up to Alaska for its food distribution programs? In August, I got a firsthand look at the network in place to do just this.

As you know, FSA purchases dairy, grain, rice, peanut, and oil products for several domestic food programs, including the Child Nutrition Programs and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). We regularly ship these commodities throughout the country, but getting them to Alaska poses a unique challenge! Alaska's climate and terrain (rough coastlines and high mountain ranges) divide the state into relatively isolated regions, and transportation is dependent on costly airlines. Alaska has 46 school districts, serving approximately 50,000 students, and 32 TEFAP sites. The school districts and TEFAP sites encompass a 586,412-square-mile area, much of it inaccessible by road. Even Juneau, Alaska's state capital, can be reached only by air or sea.

Molly Wheeler, State Distribution Program Coordinator for Alaska, invited me and several other FSA employees to see how approximately 4 million pounds of USDA commodities reach Alaska every year. Cathie Johnson, Deputy Director, Procurement and Donations Division; Patty Jennings, Chief, Grain and Export Transportation Branch; and I gladly accepted the invitation.

Our journey began in Seattle, Wash., where FSA contracts with a freight forwarder that consolidates all USDA commodity orders for delivery to Alaska. All of the commodities are shipped to Anchorage first, then dispersed to outlying communities.

The freight forwarder transports commodities to Anchorage by truck and barge. Frozen and chilled products require special attention, as they are trucked 2,400 miles from Seattle to Anchorage via the Alaska Highway.

These products are then sent to outlying areas through bypass mail, an arrangement unique to Alaska. Bypass mail is a subsidized delivery system coordinated by the U.S. Postal Service under which commodities are broken out in Anchorage into shipments of at least 1,000 pounds, and flown to their final destination. The advantage is that districts pay only the parcel post rate for frozen and chilled products, versus a much higher air freight rate.

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photo by Molly Wheeler

Patty Jennings, Cathie Johnson, and Alex King at the Student Nutrition Center in Anchorage.

## A COLUMN FROM USDA SECRETARY DAN GLICKMAN

### *Record Farm Support in 2000, But Still a Weak Safety Net*

**D**uring the year that ended on September 30, USDA distributed a record \$28 billion in direct payments to help farmers and ranchers weather these difficult economic times. USDA assistance was responsible for about half of U.S. net farm income for the year. Had it not been for our support, farm income would have plunged to its lowest level since 1984 and thousands of farmers undoubtedly would have been forced out of business.

As the new fiscal year begins, our support continues. We have begun issuing Conservation Reserve Program payments worth a total of \$1.4 billion. And USDA's new appropriations bill, which we expect the President to sign soon, includes more than \$3 billion in disaster relief and crop loss payments, including livestock assistance, support for dairy producers and money to help compensate Florida growers who were devastated by citrus canker.

We are proud of our efforts to help farmers. During farm economy slumps like this one, we consider it our obligation to do whatever possible to help the men and women of American agriculture. But ideally, farmers should not have to rely on emergency government payments to make it through the year. They ought to be able to thrive on their own, earning a living wage for their hard work, but supported by a strong farm safety net during lean times.

However, the 1996 Farm Bill, crafted by Congress at a time when prices were high and exports were strong, clearly failed to provide an adequate safety net. President Clinton warned that the bill would be a lot less generous if the economic winds shifted.

He was right. And for the last three years, we have had to provide \$25 billion in emergency assistance to help farmers survive. Again, providing this emergency support was the right thing to do, given that there were no remaining alternatives. But a preventive approach would have been better. All the support mechanisms should be in place and ready to kick in when the farm economy weakens. Instead, we were forced to scramble and hastily throw together one assistance package after another. Instead of being cushioned by a strong, built-in safety net, many farmers almost crashed to the ground before receiving emergency care.

Our people at USDA did outstanding work to administer that care. But the delivery system established by Congress allowed payments to be distributed in a careless and haphazard way. Because acreage planted prior to 1996 was factored into the formula, often money was sent to farmers for a crop that they no longer grow.



Emergency assistance is not the best public policy approach. It is more damage control than anything else. It throws money at the problem instead of crafting solutions to the problem. As recently as this past spring, the Clinton Administration had a solution, a broad safety net proposal that also fit within the framework of a balanced budget. But Congress chose not to act on our proposal.

As we prepare to write the next farm bill, we have a chance to correct the flaws in the nation's farm policy. We have a chance – and, I believe, a responsibility – to build the safety net that our farmers need and deserve. There have already been a few steps in the right direction. Last spring, the President signed a crop insurance reform bill that helps farmers better

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#### **FSA NEWS**

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manage the risk that is inherent in their work. Among other things, the new law will make premiums more affordable, help protect against multi-year losses and allow more producers, raising different kinds of crops and livestock, to obtain coverage.

But we have to do more. What I want to see – and what the Administration wants to see – is a safety net that provides countercyclical assistance, which is targeted to those farmers who need it most. It should also feature a strong conservation component, as

well as investment in rural development, support for farm cooperatives, incentives for the production of bioenergy and more. The next Administration, the next Secretary of Agriculture, and the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress must make strengthening the farm safety net a top priority.

## USDA COMMODITIES

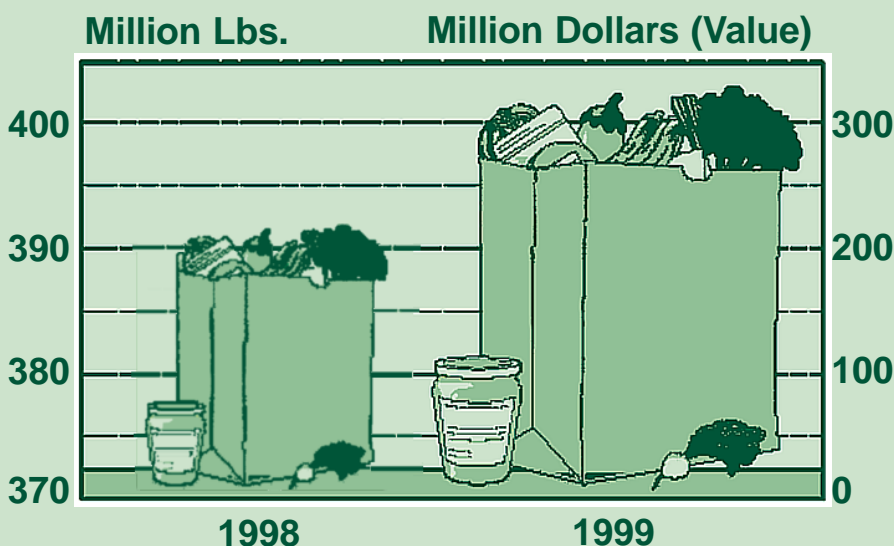
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In Anchorage, we visited the School District Student Nutrition Center, an impressive central kitchen operation with state-of-the-art equipment. The center prepares meals for Anchorage schools, which comprise about one-third of the state's participating schools. This food service system is self-supporting and includes some catering business to cover the costs of school food service.

The trip was quite informative, and I gained insight into delivery issues that apply not only to Alaska, but to the lower 48 states as well. We really appreciated the hospitality shown to us by Molly Wheeler and others who took the time to show us how the Alaskan system operates!

If you have any questions about the FSA trip to Alaska and/or USDA commodities in general, please contact Cathie Johnson at (202) 720-4254.

***FSA Purchases for Domestic Food Assistance Programs throughout the country were 391 million pounds valuing \$243 million in 1998, and 407 million pounds valuing \$302 million in 1999, a 24 percent dollar increase.***



## A Tour of New England Agriculture

by Patricia S. Andrews, Administrative Specialist, Rhode Island State Office

**F**SA employees and committee members in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island work very closely together. After all, they have similar climate, topography, and agricultural crops. Sharing staff members – a Farm Loan Chief in all three states, and a District Director and Program Specialist in Connecticut and Rhode Island – makes them even more interdependent. FSA employees in these states are in constant contact with one another as they benefit from the experiences of each office.

The staffs strengthened their bond for two days last summer, when about 15 representatives from the three states toured southeastern New England, an area known for its rural beauty, miles of stone walls, and majestic coastal areas. Though many people outside of New England might believe there is minimal farming here, there is actually a rich diversity of agriculture. For



photo by  
Patricia S. Andrews

FSA staffs tour a  
turf grass operation  
in Portsmouth, R.I.

instance, the FSA staffers visited a hydroponic lettuce farm, a vineyard, a winery, a Kentucky turf grass operation, a pick-your-own strawberry business, a Christmas tree farm, and a nursery specializing in hybrid azaleas.

Tour attendees appreciated sampling the beauty, variety, and unique quality

of southeastern New England agriculture. Many of this area's farms are being lovingly preserved by industrious families or legally preserved through land trusts. As the agricultural land here can be easily appraised at \$6,000 an acre and up, it is important that farms are protected for generations to come.

## Missouri Promotes Children's Insurance

**T**here's a new brochure on the counters in many Missouri FSA offices. FSA is partnering with the Missouri state government to

disseminate information on a children's health insurance program. The program, called MC+ for Kids, is a state-run program for uninsured children of families who lack access to affordable health coverage.

The Missouri State Division of Family Services, which sponsors MC+, sent program brochures to various FSA county offices throughout the state. The county offices display the brochures for

customers to pick up. Missouri SED Brad Epperson stresses that his staff does not promote or explain the program to farmers, so this does not take up any staff time.

Epperson notes that MC+ helps keep kids healthy and farmers in business. "It would be a real shame for farmers to lose their income or livelihood due to a child's accident or illness," he says. "Also, without health insurance, a farmer may wait longer to obtain treatment, so the insurance is preventative. Having access to adequate health insurance coverage for children is crucial to the well-being and success of Missouri's farm families."



Ralls County, Mo., CED Eddie Hamill (left) looks over the brochures with producer John Noble and his son Austin.



## Schumacher Visits Washington State

by Chris Bieker, Public Affairs Specialist, Washington State Office

**L**ast summer, Under Secretary Gus Schumacher put his green thumb to use when he helped transplant lettuce on a Washington farm. This was part of a Puget Sound agricultural tour that he attended with SED Larry Albin, state and county committee members, and RMA Regional Director Dave Paul.

The tour, covering King, Pierce, Skagit, and Snohomish counties, gave attendees a first-hand look at issues facing the diverse farms of western Washington and the challenges of adapting farm programs to that area. On the first day, the group visited a flower operation, vegetable farms, and local farmers markets. During the second day, the group toured a dairy/commercial compost business, an organic vegetable and flower farm, a fruit farm with a major processing center, and a forestry operation.

The diversity of crops and marketing strategies was matched by the diversity of cultures. Owners, farm workers, and crop specialists represented Italian, Japanese, Laotian, Hispanic, Korean, and East Indian cultures. The tour covered issues like urban encroachment on prime agriculture lands and matching farm programs to multiple crop situations. All the host farmers had one goal in common – finding ways to survive in a tight agricultural economy. Some are accomplishing this by diversifying their farms; others are trying niche marketing or vertical integration.

A local group followed up the tour by gleaning 7,000 pounds of lettuce. Shelley Rotondo, with Rotary First Harvest, talked with Schumacher about efforts to create a statewide gleaning and food distribution network. Everyone involved appreciated the Under Secretary's sincere interest in Washington agriculture.

### TURKEY AS THE NATIONAL BIRD?

If Benjamin Franklin had had his way, the turkey – not the bald eagle – would be our national bird. He lobbied for the venerable gobbler in the Continental Congress, arguing that the wild turkey was a better choice because it was native to North America and early settlers had relied on it for food. He also said it looked noble. But he was outvoted by a large margin.



photo by Chris Bieker

Inspecting lettuce are Under Secretary Schumacher; Dave Paul, RMA Regional Director; Gordon Lederer, State Committee Chair; Larry Albin, FSA SED; and vegetable grower Ron Sasaki.

## SEDs Recognize the Best

**D**uring FSA's September national conference for State Executive Directors and State Committee Chairpersons in Washington, several SEDs were honored by their peers. All SEDs voted to elect seven of their brethren to be awarded Distinguished Service Awards. The honor recognizes the awardees' years of outstanding service to producers and their high degree of public service. The Distinguished Service recipients are: Adrian Polansky, Kansas; Willie Cooper, Louisiana; Bruce Nelson, Montana; Scott Stofferahn, North Dakota; Terry Peach, Oklahoma; Don Davis, Virginia; and Billy Burke, West Virginia.

One SED, Doug Caruso of Wisconsin,

was selected by his fellow directors as the Outstanding SED in the Nation for his leadership and contribution to FSA and Wisconsin agriculture during the Clinton Administration. Since his appointment in 1993 to Wisconsin FSA, many of Caruso's accomplishments have been highly noteworthy, including employee relations and training successes, streamlining the administration of FSA programs, and working for farmers by better delivering FSA's programs.



Administrator Kelly presents the Outstanding SED Award to Doug Caruso, Wisconsin SED.

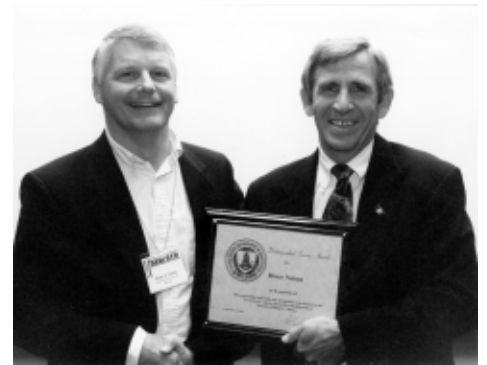
*photos by  
Eric Parsons*



Adrian Polansky with Administrator Kelly.



Willie Cooper with Administrator Kelly.



Bruce Nelson with Administrator Kelly.



Scott Stofferahn with Administrator Kelly.



Don Davis with Administrator Kelly.



Billy Burke with Administrator Kelly.

Not pictured: Terry Peach.

## From Gleaning to Growing -- A Natural Progression

by Michael Kaufman, Regional Public Affairs Specialist

**M**any FSA employees in Indiana are experts at recovering food to help the needy. Now, employees in Delaware, Fayette, Jay, Randolph, Rush, Union, and Wayne counties are going further by growing a garden patch of their own.

By planting a garden, these employees discovered that they can provide an even more reliable source of food for community service organizations. "The switch from gleaning to growing has been a very successful adaptation," says Craig Dishman, Fayette-Union CED. FSA employees maintain the garden on Randolph County's Davis-Purdue Farm, in cooperation with Purdue University.

So far, the volunteers have grown and harvested 17,000 ears of sweet corn, with seed kindly donated by Pioneer Seeds of Rushville, Ind. In one instance, Wayne County employees Jim Ausherman, Jan Burk, and CED Dick Best delivered nearly 2,000 ears of corn to the Richmond Salvation Army, Eastern Indiana Community Food Bank, and other area help centers.



photo by Lisa Deboy

Randie Johnson, Randolph County CED; and Dick Best, Wayne County CED; with a truckload of sweet corn.

"I'm proud of the volunteerism of Indiana FSA employees," says SED Robert Peacock. "It is gratifying for employees when home grown produce can directly satisfy the needs of our

communities." The close ties that FSA employees have with the farming community make the volunteer harvest a very natural and fruitful way to provide assistance to the needy.

### PUMPKIN PIE IS TOPS

According to the American Pie Council, pumpkin pie is America's favorite – but only at Thanksgiving time. The rest of the year, apple is the number one pie and pumpkin is a distant second. Here's a list of the top five favorite pies for Thanksgiving:

1. Pumpkin
2. Apple
3. Cherry
4. Lemon Meringue
5. Pecan, Chocolate Cream, and Mincemeat (in a three-way tie)



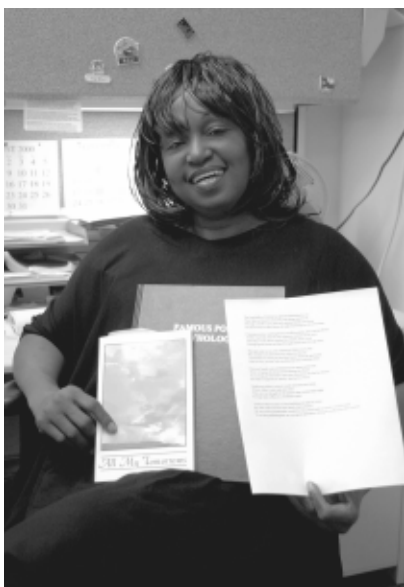
### Answers to October's Puzzle

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## FSA's Poet Laureate

**I**t seems that Earline Brown has another talent besides helping provide financial assistance to farmers hit by natural disasters. Earline, a program specialist with FSA's Noninsured Assistance Program Branch, is a talented poet. She's had several of her works published in poetry books, and most recently had four poems published on [www.poetry.com](http://www.poetry.com). To the right is a sample of her work.



Earline Brown.

photo by Eric Parsons

### *The Lady at USDA*

*The long halls of USDA have special memories for me  
They remind me of the way things used to be  
Through a child's eyes, the halls seemed empty and long  
As the lady walked them all night humming her favorite song.*

*The lady I write about cleaned rooms and washed doors  
She scrubbed toilets, sinks, and waxed floors  
Her duty, along with others, was to keep USDA clean  
This lady and the others worked behind the scenes.*

*This lady's hands were blistered, her knees were sore  
From wringing the mop and scrubbing the floors  
As a young girl she had to stop her education, she had no choice  
She had to support her family, she had no voice.*

*This lady worked from 5:00 pm in the evening until one  
She waited each night for her family to come  
To bring her a hot lunch, the guard would call  
And this lady would appear at the end of the hall.*

*This lady had no car, she walked to USDA every day  
She worked very hard and had little to say  
On swollen feet she would walk home alone  
Being so tired and worn when she got home.*

*She would come home, cook, clean, and do her best  
She never complained or took time to rest  
I love this lady dearly and even more every day  
She was a strong lady that paved the way.*

*The lady at USDA was my Grandmother  
She was a charwoman and proud, like no other  
She would have been pleased and much it would mean  
To know that her kin works in the building she cleaned.*

Ode to Mama by Earline Brown

## CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

Date	Location	Event
October 31-November 2	Modesto, Calif.	Associate Administrator George Arredondo to attend AMS Outreach Conference
October 31-November 3	Reno, Nev.	Carolyn Cooksie, Deputy Administrator for Farm Loan Programs, to attend Appleseed Conference
Month of November		American Indian Heritage Month
November 7-10	San Antonio, Texas	Administrator Kelly to attend National Agrability Training Workshop
November 7-14	Kansas City, Mo.	Alex King, Acting Deputy Administrator for Commodity Operations, to meet with Kansas City officials
November 11		Veterans Day
November 15-16	St. Louis, Mo.	Alex King to attend USDA Commodity Operations Team Meeting
November 16-18	Great Falls, Mont.	Administrator Kelly to attend Women Involved in Farm Economics Conference
November 23		Thanksgiving
November 24-December 1	Savannah, Ga.	Carolyn Cooksie; Robert Springer, Executive Director for State Operations; and John Williams, Deputy Administrator for Management; to attend and conduct Farm Loan Program Training

*Note: The above is subject to change.*